

Gerald Ford: Tradition And Civility

In this season of troubles in Washington, welcome reassurance is coming from the personality and performance of that comfortingly familiar figure—Gerald R. Ford.

As the Vice President-designate and heir apparent to a severely beleaguered President, the gentleman from Grand Rapids is the man on the spot. He is the key figure in an unprecedented experiment, testing whether a government of divided partisanship can make an untried provision of the Constitution operate in a climate of pervasive public distrust.

His conscientious preparation, his evident cooperativeness and his candor are making his confirmation hearings an occasion in which the country can not only learn something of the character of its new Vice President but relearn the value of one of its oldest traditions — the tradition of civility.

Ford's second sentence to the Senate Rules Committee was: "I feel that I am among friends." That is a rather remarkable thing for the Republican leader of the House to say to a committee of the Democratic Congress, which is not only sitting in judgment on him but is taking preliminary steps to remove from office the Republican President who appointed him.

But it is a statement that springs naturally to Ford, who operates, under any circumstance, in a tradition of civility, of mutual accommodation, of respect for persons and institutions.

This unwritten tradition underlies the written Constitution, but it has been badly battered in these recent years, as one President lashed out at opponents of his war policies and his successor compiled an "enemies list."

Whatever his shortcomings, in intellect, oratory, or wit, Gerry Ford is one of the most decent human beings in Washington. He is not a hater, nor is he under a constant compulsion to prove his own worth by dominating and downgrading others.

The qualities he has displayed in his confirmation hearings — and in 25 years in Congress — may be just what the doctor ordered for this badly battered Republic. A congressman's wife who watched his testimony on television remarked that he reminded her of Eisenhower. He lacks the personality and the smile that made it so easy to "like Ike," but that flat Midwestern voice and that open face encourage trust.

When he says, as he did, that "my platform, gentlemen, is always to support truth and intelligent compromise," you know that is the authentic Ford credo — and not a line some public relations adviser furnished.

A House colleague, enlisting support for his confirmation among Democrats, says he has been surprised to learn how many members of the opposition "really do consider Gerry a personal friend." Such friendships are rare among congressmen of opposite parties, and particularly among those whose leadership roles require them to operate, as Ford has, in a highly partisan fashion.

But Ford does not let partisanship carry to the point of personal enmity. It is inconceivable that his office would compile an "enemies list." As remarked previously here, his style of leadership in the House has been genuinely open and consultative. As Vice President or President, he testified, he would continue to make himself accessible to members of Congress and the press.

Even in the stress of this current situation, he has deliberately reached outside his own circle for guidance. In advance of the hearings, he sought out a group of certified "eggheads" and told them he was concerned that his reputation as a non-intellectual not be taken by them as a sign that he was anti-intellectual. He seemed genuinely relieved at being told that the very fact that he had sought such a meeting went a long way toward establishing the point he wanted to make.

A colleague in the Republican leadership says, "We learned very quickly that Gerry does not like to make decisions alone." A Ford administration would be an exercise in collective leadership.

Those members of Congress who know him best are unanimous in their belief that, should Ford become President, he would seek to continue the main lines of the Nixon foreign and domestic policy — détente abroad and decentralization at home.

He would try to keep Henry Kissinger and Melvin Laird as his chief foreign and domestic policy lieutenants, knowing full well that both men are more guileful and sophisticated than he is himself.

What Ford would bring to such a government is the simplicity and honesty and openness and benignity that have been missing so long from the White House.

As the awareness of those qualities in him has sunk in, the hunger for their restoration in national leadership has grown. "The sooner the better" doctrine now applies, not just to Ford's confirmation for the vice presidency, but to the step beyond.